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ABSTRACT

The study investigated differences in locus of control for 219 college students majoring in regular education and 354 students majoring in special education. A one-way analysis of variance was used to determine if significant differences existed between groups. No significant differences on the Nowicki-Strickland Adult Scale for Locus of Control were found between regular and special education majors, nor between special education subgroups of general special education, behavior disorders, mental retardation, and learning disabilities specialization. Further, no differences were found between males and females nor between general regular education majors, elementary education majors, and secondary education majors. Graduate students in special and regular education were more internal in locus of control than seniors, juniors, sophomores, or freshmen. (CL)

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LOCUS OF CONTROL IN MAJORS IN SUBAREA SPECIALIZATIONS OF EDUCATION

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Introduction

Professionals and preservice students in the field of education are often overheard conversing on the topic of personality trait differences among individuals teaching or studying in the subareas of this field (i.e. elementary level general education, secondary level general education, mental retardation, learning disabilities, behavioral disorders). Certain traits such as assertiveness, self-confidence, shyness, and patience are sometimes associated with one or more of these subareas. Do these subjective perceptions exist in reality or are they less than accurate stereotypes which have been perpetuated over the years? This study was conducted to determine if one personality variable, locus of control, is different between college majors in a number of subareas of education.

Locus of control, derived from Social Learning Theory (Rotter, 1954), is a measurable psychological construct which provides an understanding of how reinforcement affects an individual's behavior, and how that, in turn, affects the degree to which a person perceives a causal relationship existing between their behavior and resultant reinforcement. Locus of control is a generalized expectancy, rather than being situation specific, that is, it operates across a large number and variety of life's situations, and relates to whether the individual sees himself as possessing or lacking power to influence events which occur within his environment.

The control construct exists along a continuum from a strong acceptance in external determinism to a strong assumption of internal dominion or command. When an individual perceives reinforcement as being determined by his/her behavior or relatively permanent personal characteristics, this person is said to have an internal locus of control. If, however, an individual views an event which follows a personal action as not being contingent upon that action, but rather due to chance, fate, luck, control of powerful others, or as being unpredictable given the complexity of environmental forces, that person is said to possess an external locus of control. It is important to note, however, that a person is not totally internal or external in orientation. Rather, it is more appropriate to view a person as being more or less internal or external in their view of their influence in causality of events affecting their lives.

Methodology

Over the course of four years, the Nowicki-Strickland Adult Scale for Locus of Control (Nowicki and Strickland, 1973) was administered to 675 education majors at six universities. The students were requested to complete the questionnaire although cooperation was voluntary. However, if a student chose not to participate, they were asked to indicate such on the face of the questionnaire. One student chose to do so.

A one-way analysis of variance technique was used to determine if significant differences existed between groups.

Review of Literature

A review of the literature revealed no research on personality traits among education majors. With respect to locus of control, no research data existed for majors in the teaching fields. There is, however, information available regarding locus of control for college students in general. For example, externals show more interpersonal distance (Duke and Nowicki, 1972), debilitating anxiety (Kendall, Finch & Montgomery, 1976), authoritarianism (Surlin, 1976), less self actualization (Hjelle, 1975), and lower self-esteem than their more internal counterparts.

Results

No significant differences were revealed when regular education majors (N=219) were compared to special education majors (N=354). When special education majors were divided into the areas of general special education (N=238), behavior disorders specialization (N=23), mental retardation specialization (N=47), and learning disabilities specialization (N=46), again no differences with respect to locus of control were found between groups. Additionally, when general regular education majors (N=98), elementary education majors (N=39), and secondary education majors (N=82) were included with the above groupings, no differences between groups were revealed.

Other group comparisons were also conducted. No significant differences were found on the locus of control scale between males (N=89) and females (N=586). There were, however, differences between groups which were organized

by the year in school. Within the total group of education majors, graduate students (N=35) were significantly more internal than either seniors (N=163), juniors (N=218), sophomores (N=225) or freshmen (N=32). The same results held true for special education majors only. Graduate students (N=12) again were significantly more internal than were special education seniors (N=50), juniors (N=115), sophomores (N=150), or freshmen (N=25).

Each of the various levels of special education majors were then compared by use of separate T-tests with special education teachers (N=447) from a previous study concerning locus of control (McIntyre, 1981). Freshmen were not included in this analysis. Only special education sophomores were significantly different from the practicing teachers.

Summary and Conclusions

This exploratory study revealed no differences with respect to locus of control between education majors grouped by their subarea of specialization. However, one interesting finding revealed that graduate students were more internal than other levels of students. This result applied to the overall sample and to special education majors in particular. If one assumes that graduate students have more experience in teaching than other levels, this assumption, along with the finding that special education sophomores were significantly more external than practicing special education teachers, may possibly indicate that teaching experience is a factor in developing a more internal locus of control.

However, this interpretation of the findings must be stated with caution, as the effects of age may be a contributor.

Lastly, it is interesting to note the lack of research in the area of differences between submajors in education. It would appear to be of benefit to the profession to know if a certain personality trait affects teaching style or ability. It would also behoove teacher training institutes to be aware of why individuals choose to enter one of the educational specialization areas. Additionally, if the possession of certain traits is found to be desirable for specific areas of specialization, perhaps these traits can be fostered or used in a screening process by preservice programs.

The study of personal traits with respect to education majors is, without doubt, an area in need of more inspection.

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